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Article

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Iraq: US Withdrawal Unlikely To Push Baghdad Toward Iran

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OFFICE OF IRAQ ANALYSIS

We assess Baghdad will not become an Iranian ally during the next few years because it disagrees with Tehran on core bilateral issues—such as borders and support for militants—and Iraqi elites and the public are suspicious of Iran's intentions in Iraq. Prime Minister al-Maliki has avoided concessions to Iran on territorial and security disputes and expanded trade and diplomatic outreach to diversify ties away from Iran.

— Disagreements between Baghdad and Tehran are likely to continue

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— Iran's unpopularity suggests that Iraqi parties preparing for elections in 2013 and 2014 will publicly distance themselves from Tehran.

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— However, Iraq's Shia-led government pursues common economic interests and cordial diplomatic relations with Tehran to maintain Iranian political and financial support Iraqi officials judge is important to consolidating power.

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Maliki's rivals worry that the US withdrawal will give Iran greater influence in shaping Iraqi politics. Iraqi Kurds and Sunni Arabs have long complained of Tehran's role in Iraq and believe that the end of the US military mission and the failure to grant immunities to US trainers signify growing Iranian influence that will strain US-Iraq relations.

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— Maliki probably is confident that sustained close relations with Washington and purchases of advanced US weapon systems will counteract the perception that Iran holds sway over his decisionmaking.

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Article Iraq: US Withdrawal Unlikely To Push Baghdad Toward...

Continued

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During the next few years, Baghdad probably will seek to avoid involvement in regional power struggles between Arab states and Iran and situations in which it must choose between Washington and Tehran. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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— In March Maliki told [REDACTED] that Iraq seeks to occupy a middle ground in the Arab-Iranian regional rivalry. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] In 2009, however, a Maliki adviser warned [REDACTED] that a regional or US attempt to confront Iran would have sectarian overtones and lead Iraqi Shia to find common cause with Iran. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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Iraq: Opportunities To Reinforce Nationalist Approach Toward Iran

Frame Iran-Iraq relations in the context of sovereignty and respect.

Baghdad's focus on defending its sovereignty makes Iranian border violations and political interference a point of contention.

- Baghdad might press Tehran privately if it received evidence of continued support to Iraqi militants or the potential use of Iraqi territory to deliver weapons to regional allies.
- If Iran and Iraq face a dispute about borders or the ownership of oilfields near the border, Baghdad probably would welcome US diplomatic support in international forums.

Encourage Iraqi democracy.

Iraqi leaders are proud of their elected government and largely reject Iranian-style clerical rule.

- Provincial and national elections tentatively planned for 2013 and 2014 will be opportunities to praise Iraqi democracy and provide technical assistance.
- Most Iraqi parties have sought electoral assistance from Western NGOs and the UN.

Support Iraq's trade diversification, especially in oil exports.

Since 2005 Iraq's trade has grown faster with other neighbors and Asia than with Iran, according to official data from Iraq's trading partners.

- Baghdad might eventually need US help with other OPEC members to gain higher export quotas than Iran if Iran attempts to reimpose equal quotas.
- Baghdad is looking to diversify trade routes through Jordan and Turkey, which would divert trade away from Iran.
- Iraqi officials could be persuaded that perceived violations of international sanctions against Iran might scare away foreign investment.

Emphasize—particularly to Iraqi Shia—that the Arab, Turkish, and US governments will work to strengthen ties.

An adviser to Prime Minister al-Maliki predicted that Iraqi Shia would resist Iranian influence as long as the US remains an ally and Arab governments did not "close their doors" to Iraq.

- This year Maliki was confident that regional US military forces could deter external threats, suggesting that air support to Iraq from US regional bases would give him confidence in dealing with Iran.
- Regular meetings within the context of the US-Iraq Strategic Framework Agreement, coordination with Maliki on regional policy, and expand military sales would signal US commitment.

Keep channels open among rival Iraqi political parties to reduce Maliki's use of Iranian mediation.

- US diplomats will be well placed to suggest areas of common interest and work to defuse tension among Iraq's rival parties.

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